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ABSTRACT

Borrowing from Heidegger and following Pamela Caughie and Victor Vitanza, the work of Virginia Woolf can be linked to composition pedagogies to ask: "What are composition instructors still not thinking in relation to the postmodern?" An answer may be found through postmodern rereadings of Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" and postmodern rereadings of rhetoric and composition theory and pedagogy. These rereadings of Woolf and the questions that such rereadings raise will then help argue for and valorize postmodern composition pedagogies that turn (trope) against "teaching composition" and allow for an ethical "letting learn." Caughie's rereading of Woolf tacitly explores the ethical dimension of Woolf's work, located in her deconstructive style of writing. Like Caughie, Vitanza, too, is interested in paratactic linking and postmodern thinking, and he argues that it is through an understanding of language games that participants can figure out which games play to win and which games play to keep the game going. Vitanza's project has much in common with the work of Woolf, whose "A Room of One's Own" saw as its project a desire to create a space for the women writers who had been left out of prose histories. In this work she lays out her desire, and it is in her "ways of proceeding," her aesthetic politics, as she puts this desire before readers that her paraethics (or libidinized ethics) are revealed. A current that can be figured as the metonymy of an affirmative desire runs through the book, and it is this current that allows for "letting learn." (Contains 11 notes and 16 references.) (RS)

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Bearing Witness to Differends: Virginia Woolf and Postmodern Composition Pedagogies

Woolf's project, political and literary, was neither to "break the laws," that is to reject the established social and literary conventions, nor to "find the law," that is, to codify new, more liberating conventions, for once such conventions are changed, the important question still remains: And now? Instead her project was to trace the laws, to find the connections, and to remake them over and over again.

Pamela L. Caughie, Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism

To be sure, some people will say, here, that I am conflating poetics and rhetoric. But what am I to do? other than insist that poetics and rhetoric were artificially separated, for example, by Plato and Aristotle. (And they were separated for reasons of the game of knowledge, the game of power!) Political discourse is poetics and vice versa.

Victor J. Vitanza, "Taking A-Count of a (Future-Anterior) History of Rhetoric"

I shall speak about women's writing: about what it will do.

Hélène Cixous "Laugh of the Medusa"

In Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism: Literature in Quest and Question of Itself, Pamela L. Caughie argues that Woolf's work, viewed through the terministic screen of postmodernism, has allowed us to see what has been left out of poetics, a leaving out that encourages Caughie to call for a reconfiguration of poetics altogether. Caughie would call for an understanding of

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literature (poetics) as having a function to do things to us, to change us. Change, once the domain of political rhetoric, is now reconfigured in Caughie's poetics and aligned with the aesthetics of Woolf's art (cf. Moi, Ratcliffe, and Benstock).

Similarly, in "Taking A-Count of a (Future-Anterior) History of Rhetoric," Victor J. Vitanza argues that the ancient split between rhetoric and poetics, ordained by the Hellenic Greeks, removed aesthetics (as a political agent of change) from rhetoric, a split that Vitanza's postmodern rhetoric would rethink. To prepare the way for this relinking of rhetoric and aesthetics, Vitanza's postmodern project would resist the classical bifurcation of rhetoric and poetics and the modernist nostalgia for origins that ties history and pedagogy to a model of lack and to a destructive obsession with the negative (that which says "No," that which represses).[1] Borrowing from Freud's work with hysterics and from Deleuze and Guattari's post-psychoanalytical project that would resist the lack model constructed by Freud's Oedipus (Anti-Oedipus), Vitanza would write "hysteries of rhetorics" that would allow that which is "nonrational," that which has been excluded from canonized, "rational" history, to finally be heard ("Taking A-Count" 182).

Following Jean-François Lyotard, both Caughie and Vitanza work out of a postmodern rhetoric that desires to bear witness to

differends (Lyotard The Differend)--unresolvable cases of conflict that lack a common rule of judgment. This postmodern rhetoric works by searching for idioms or language games through which to express that which previously has been silenced.[2] And the desire to practice this rhetoric leads Caughie and Vitanza to look for new ways of linking rhetorics, poetics, and feminisms--paratactic linkings that allow silences to speak.

Here, borrowing from Heidegger and following Caughie and Vitanza, I link the work of Virginia Woolf to composition pedagogies to ask, "What are we are still not thinking" in relation to the postmodern? (Heidegger What is called Thinking?), and try to answer this question through postmodern rereadings of Woolf's A Room of One's Own and postmodern rereadings of rhetroic and composition theory and pedagogy. Toril Moi and Pamela Caughie, for example criticize readings of Woolf's work that are based on a realist aesthetics that privileges what Woolf says over the way that she says. Their postmodern rereadings argue that such criticisms leave no room for Woolf's style and its deconstructive and potentially political aesthetic. Similarly, postmodern rereadings of rhetoric and composition theory encourage us to question rhetorical paradigms that rest on realist, mimetic understandings of language.

To take a postmodern turn in rhetorics, poetics, and

feminisms is to turn away from the ontological (and essentialist) question, What is it? and to turn toward the question, How is it possible? (And thus how could it be otherwise?). These rereadings of Woolf and the questions that such rereadings raise will then help me argue for and valorize postmodern composition pedagogies that turn (trope) against "teaching composition" and allow for an ethical "letting learn."

Taken from Heidegger's What is Called Thinking?, "letting learn," works to deconstruct the dichotomy of teacher as knower/authority and student as lacking knowledge/disciple. An attitude of "letting learn" resists the notion of teaching as inculcation of dogma or the repetition of grand narratives (cf. Lyotard The Postmodern Condition). Letting learn values open-endedness and a will to resist closure, and, I would argue, favors what Vitanza describes as "paraethics," a desire to disperse power ("Open Letter" 276).

So how might my linking of Woolf and Moi and Caughie and Vitanza help us to understand "letting learn" and reunderstand our relations to language, subjectivity, and gender? I begin with Moi.

To appropriate Woolf's work to feminism, Moi proposes a deconstructive reading of Woolf's essay A Room of One's Own that can explain its playful structure, its evasion of the most

careful employment of analytical tools. In Moi's estimation, Woolf's work will lend itself well to Jacques Derrida's theory of deconstruction which argues: "language is structured as an endless deferral of meaning and any search for an essential, absolutely stable meaning must therefore be considered metaphysical" (Moi 9).

Moi also claims that Woolf's work is susceptible to a reading through the theories of Julia Kristeva who argues:

> the modernist poem [or poetic prose] with its abrupt shifts, ellipses, breaks and apparent lack of logical construction is a kind of writing in which the rhythms of the body and the unconscious have managed to break through the strict rational defenses of conventional social meaning. (Moi 11)

For Moi, poetic language (like that of Woolf), with its power to fragment the symbolic order, inscribes "a specific practice of writing that is itself 'revolutionary,' analogous to sexual and political transformation, and that by its very existence testifies to the possibility of transforming the symbolic order . . . from the inside" (Moi 11; cf. Benstock).

Moi concludes that a rereading of Woolf in terms of Derrida's and Kristeva's aesthetics has much to offer feminist theories; and yet Moi also cautions that a way needs to be found to join this inner revolution of the subject and her relation to language with "a materialist analysis of society" (15). Deconstruction, as Moi realizes, by its very nature resists the

founding of political programs.

While I appreciate the problems that Moi points to, my work will be to affirm--rather than to decry--this resistance. The alternative politics that I advocate vis-a-vis postmodernism will work to address Moi's concerns without proposing an alternative political program. The politics that I put forward, through my study of Woolf's writing, would be best described as an aesthetic politics. To create a place for this politics I turn to Caughie and Vitanza.

Caughie's rereading of Woolf tacitly explores the ethical dimension of Woolf's work, located in her deconstructive style of writing.[3] Caughie will describe this deconstructive style as indicative of Woolf's "ways of proceeding," ways that do not settle into a figure, but instead persistently deconstruct any will to create a system and then maintain systematicity.

In a comment that suggests the influence of Lyotard, Caughie states that her postmodern critical account will "resist large claims . . . , directing itself instead toward more localized narratives" (2).[4] From a postmodern position, Caughie claims that Woolf has "no essential nature" (2) and challenges those, like Jane Marcus, who would make totalizing claims that Woolf's work provides us with "women's words, the feminine sentence, and finally the appropriate female form (Marcus New Feminist Essays,

xiv; qtd. in Caughie 3; Caughie's emphasis; cf. Transue who also evinces this tendency to essentialize). Caughie points to the ways that the metaphors that we use to describe our relation to Woolf make a difference in our understanding of Woolf's own narrative strategies. When Marcus claims that Woolf "raided the patriarchy and trespassed on male territory, returning to share her spoils with other women" (Marcus New Feminist Essays, xiv; qtd. in Caughie 3), Caughie claims that Marcus has concocted metaphors to describe Woolf that are in no way commensurate with Woolf's own narrative tactics. As Caughie notes, "Woolf was more apt to expose concepts and conventions than to 'raid' them. What Woolf's work--with its postmodern tendencies--allows us to see, then, is that "[a]ny tradition [including our traditional valuations and evaluations of fiction] is a construct, defined by what it is compared and contrasted to, and of value only in terms of a particular use to which it is put" (5).

Caughie maintains that when Woolf "trace[s] the history and uses of prose" in A Room of One's Own(20), Woolf's own prose enacts and demonstrates the theory of language games advocated by Wittgenstein that focuses on language as it is used, on its pragmatics. For Caughie, an understanding of language use as a function of language games allows us to see that our understanding of narrative will change depending on the story

that we tell about that narrative. A "modernist" story will tell about "overcoming obstacles" (21). A "postmodernist" story will "focus on its own motives and its own methods in order to note what is at stake in the stories we tell and how we might tell them differently" (19).

While Caughie avoids political activism throughout her text, there is, finally, an ethical and social agenda to be found in her ways of proceeding.[5] Using Woolf and her work as model, Caughie wants neither to "forge a new social order, a feminist claim" nor "to forge a new narrative order, a modernist claim" (207). Caughie wants, rather, to follow Woolf "by staying on the surface," a way of proceeding through which "Woolf reveal[s] how much narrative and social behavior is bound by various conventions. By staying on the surface, [then], Woolf . . . enact[s] a different way of thinking by means of which we can free ourselves, not from all conventions, but from our unawareness of some conventions and thus from the inevitable repetition of the same" (207-208).

In Caughie's postmodern rereading of Woolf and in Caughie's postmodern reformulation of fiction through Woolf, she is determined to allow herself not to be taught by Woolf's writing tactics, but rather to be enabled by them to create a space for "letting learn." Caughie's desire not to impose the arbitrary

categories on Woolf that tradition and criticism have dictated enact what "letting learn" makes possible: namely, the discovery of new ways of linking, new lines and flows of thinking.

Like Caughie, Vitanza, too, is interested in paratactic linking and postmodern thinking,and he argues that it is through an understanding of language games that we can figure out which games play to win and which games play to keep the game going.[6] In his project to rewrite and rethink "the history of rhetoric," Vitanza's work shares motives in common with those of Caughie in her reformulation and rethinking of the history of poetics. Vitanza is distrustful of consensus (see Lyotard Postmodern, xxv), distrustful of the language game of referentiality (see Nietzsche), and distrustful of the will to power that is a function of (molar)politics "that goes toward the large numbers and the mass phenomena"[7] (Deleuze and Guattari Anti-Oedipus, 279-80; qtd. in Vitanza "Taking A-Count," 210-11). Like Caughie, Vitanza is interested in local narratives (see "Three Countertheses" 163-64) and in what he styles a (micro)politics, rather than in a (molar)politics based on global, totalizing grand narratives[8] (see Lyotard Postmodern, 27-31; cf. Differend 151-81; cf. Foucault "The Confession of the Flesh," 199-201). Taking his cue from Deleuze and Guattari, Vitanza espouses a (micro)politics that would "no longer obey the statistical laws (of

a master group or narrative)" but rather would consist of "waves and corpuscles, flows and partial objects that are no longer dependent upon the large numbers" (Deleuze and Guattari Anti-Oedipus, 279-80; qtd. in "Taking A-Count" 211).

The ethical imperative that is hinted at in Caughie is explicitly articulated in Vitanza, who sees any move toward a grand narrative, any attempt to write out and systematize the rules of the game--whether the game of poetics or the game of rhetorics--as a potentially fascistic move to totalize and to codify--the moves that necessarily precede the final move in the game of education--to teach. Thus, in his project to reconceptualize and rewrite the history of rhetoric, Vitanza, like Caughie, is wary of the metaphors that he uses to describe his project; indeed, for Vitanza, all language is an army of metaphors. Thus, rather than write "The history of rhetorik," ("Taking A-Count" 187) Vitanza mobilizes his metaphors to write "hysteries of rhetorics" that include or "bear witness" (Lyotard Differend, 181) to all excluded groups whose written and spoken linguistic patterns go unseen and unheard by the language game of rationality.

Vitanza will remind us that part of what we have forgotten, repressed, said "NO" to is the link that once existed between rhetoric (the political) and poetics (aesthetics), a link that

came undone beginning with Aristotle's bifurcation, Rhetoric/Poetics. This link is necessary, Vitanza will argue (through Kristeva and Lacan), because of the force within art to effect change (cf. Moi on Kristeva, Sexual/Textual Politics 12-13). In "Three Countertheses," Vitanza's counter to the will of composition pedagogy to harness theory to practice through the "language game of knowledge" (scientific reason), Vitanza will relink the aesthetic and the political alongside Lyotard through the language "game of avant-garde theory-art"[9] (160). This "language game of art" (like the game played by the work of Woolf), would resist traditional structures of confinement--of gender, of genre.

Vitanza's "hystery" would write the "hystery of desire" that has been left out of the history of the over rationalized logos. For a view of logos Vitanza would return to the Pre-Socratics and the early Sophists whom he styles as hysterics. The Sophists, practicing non-rational dissoi-logoi or contradictory argument, represent a group that has been excluded from the model of traditional histories of rhetoric.[10] This kind of exclusionary logic that forces out what does not fit the model encourages Vitanza to be suspicious of models, of systematization, and he claims that the value of hysteria as a conceptual restarting place is that hysteria lies outside of the rational, the

institutional. For Vitanza, hysteria is about denegation that may be put to use productively in hystery-writing

In Vitanza's "hystery," a listening space is made for that which has been excluded from the binaries of Western ordering systems, systems that insist that a text must be fiction or non-fiction, not some monstrous text that lies somewhere between. Vitanza's hystery would find a space for "Excluded Thirds" that do not fit into binary systematization.

Thus Vitanza's project, which includes that which has been left out of traditional histories, has much in common with the work of Woolf, whose A Room of One's Own saw as its project a desire to create a space for the women writers who had been left out of prose histories.

In A Room of One's Own, Woolf lays out her--perhaps our--desire, and it is in her "ways of proceeding," her aesthetic politics, as she puts this desire before us that her paraethics (or libidinalized ethics) are revealed. At the beginning of A Room of One's Own, the narrator sits by a river on the fictional campus of Oxbridge to contemplate the relation between women and fiction; she then chronicles a series of events on the campus of the men's university that reveal the ways and the means through which women have been excluded from the academy and from positions of power and knowledge in society.

For most of the book, the narrator operates from what Vitanza would call the "lack model," across the negative of modernism. At luncheon, for example, she sees a Manx cat, and the tailless cat's lack encourages the narrator to look for what is missing from life as she knew it before the war.

At the end of the book, however, Woolf's narrator sees a street scene in which, for a moment, everything is still. A leaf falls and appears to be a "signal pointing to a force in things which one had overlooked. It seemed to point to a river, which flowed past, invisibly, round the corner, down the street, and took people and eddied them along . . . ." (100). She sees a man and a woman come from opposite sides of the street, borne on this current; they get into a taxi which is carried away by the current as well. And it is this sight that encourages her to quit opposing one sex to the other; it is this sight that releases the strictures that thinking of the sexes as opposed to one another has created; it is this sight that alleviates the sense that "one is unconsciously holding something back," a "repression [that] becomes an effort" (101).

At this moment, the narrator turns her back on the lack model of modernism and turns toward a postmodern model of affirmation. Although it is at this place that the narrator calls for androgyny, I do not think that she is looking for synthesis;

rather, androgyny becomes, for Woolf and her narrators, a conceptual restarting place, a third term which is neither the cultural category woman nor the cultural category man, but the counter-category "man-womanly" or "woman-manly" (Room 102).[11]

Woolf, like Vitanza, is looking for an ethical way to begin again, to conceptualize gender differently and to affirm that difference. Thus she enacts aesthetically and poetically (and thereby puts forward rhetorically) a paraethics that might inform a (micro)politics. Woolf's narrative strategies, then, do more than put forward the (molar)politics noted by Moi. Woolf's narrative strategies suggest a paraethics that acknowledges and yet resists what has been (the past), what is (the present), and in so doing creates the space for and the conditions for the possibility of the "what will have been" (the future anterior).

If we refocus our sight when we read this last scene and look at the surfaces of the text through the lens of postmodernism, we may see not so much a man, a woman, and a taxi, or even figures of androgyny, but notice instead the current that carries them, a current that may be figured as the metonymy of an affirmative desire. I am arguing, then, that it is this current of desire that makes things move; it is this current of desire that creates the condition for the possibility of something new, something other, to occur; it is this current that allows for

"letting learn."

If "letting learn" calls for following language where it leads, "letting learn" gathers intensity from an understanding of language which argues that language leads and moves us by way of the conjunction of poetics, rhetorics, and aesthetics, a simultaneity that I have begun to describe through the lens of the postmodern. There are implications, then, that follow from the work of Woolf when read through this lens, implications that reach much farther than the discipline of literary criticism or the field of critical theory. And these implications call for ways of proceeding that are wary of consensus, wary of hard and fast judgments, wary of totalizing global metanarratives. Inevitably, these ways of proceeding, or what I have called aesthetic politics, will impinge on the ways in which we feel comfortable making judgments, in determining what is "good" and what is "true," whether we are evaluating a possible work of art, a composition program, or another human being. To see through the lens of postmodernism is to reformulate not only what it is possible to think, but how it is possible to be. As teachers of composition, How do we fare in this game of learning to "let learn?" I leave this question hanging.

NOTES

[1]Vitanza defines the negative as "a return to Habermas"; i.e., a return to a state that Vitanza does not believe to be possible: "uncoerced consensus based on a communicative model of rationality as warranted assertability" (Negation 60). Vitanza defines negation as a function of our very will-to-define and then goes on to argue for that which resists the negative:

> [N]egation--which is the principle of definition or rhetorical invention--is a strategy that determines what something is by way of excluding (the Sophists do not exist! Woman does not exist! The mathematical sublime or aestheticized politics exist, but each is dangerous!, considering what they lead us to), excess, or nonpositive affirmation, on the other hand, is a tactic that denegates negations by way of reincluding. (Negation 63; cf. Berlin Rhetorics, Poetics, and Cultures, xvii-xviii, 100-1)

[2]A differend is "a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both parties" [Lyotard Differend, xi]).

[3]Moi affirmatively deconstructs the critique of Woolf made by Patricia Stubbs who claims that "in Woolf 'there is no coherent attempt to create new models, new images of women,' and that 'this failure to carry her feminism through into her novels seems to stem, at least in part, from her aesthetic theories'" (Stubbs Women and Fiction, 231; qtd. in Moi 5). Moi characterizes Woolf's resistance to the creation of "new models" and "new images" as an important element of Woolf's "deconstructive" (9) aesthetics, aesthetics that Caughie will characterize as postmodern.

[4]The narratives Caughie refers to as "local" are also called "little" narratives by Lyotard. Lyotard opposes the term "little narrative" to the grand [totalizing] metanarratives [such as the grand narratives of Enlightenment] that have been called into question by postmodernism. For a discussion of these narratives see Lyotard's The Postmodern Condition (Intro xxiv-xxv, 60).

[5]Caughie argues that tactics enabled by postmodernism allow us to see that it is our very ways of proceeding, i.e., our aesthetic politics, that give rise to ideology, not the other way around, and she claims that by attending to the work of Woolf, we learn both how ideology comes into being and how a means to

counter that ideology might come into being as well.

[6]Like Caughie, like Woolf, Vitanza is interested in relations between things. Working from Lyotard's definition of postmodernism, Vitanza is "working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done" (the paradox of the future [post] anterior [modo] (Lyotard The Postmodern Condition, 81; qtd. in Vitanza 187). Working again from Lyotard, Vitanza admonishes, "We must not forget: 'It is necessary to link . . . but not how to link'" (Lyotard Differend, 66; qtd. in Vitanza 188). "History, rationally founded, Vitanza tells us, links according to rules; hystery, nonrationally un/founded, links to reach for 'some more'" (188)

[7]For a discussion of Nietzsche's relationship to the subject and language see Spivak's "Translator's Preface" to Of Grammatology. In it she quotes Nietzsche, who maintains that the assertion that "there must be something 'that thinks' is simply a formulation of our grammatical custom that adds a doer to every deed" (Nietzsche Will to Power, 268; qtd. in Spivak "Translator's Preface" Of Grammatology xxiv).

[8]And yet it should be pointed out that despite the similarities between the projects of Caughie and Vitanza, there are also a number of differences. It would be fair to say that the early work of Vitanza (which figures heavily in this chapter) is more closely aligned with Caughie than is his 1997 publication, Negation, Subjectivity, and the History of Rhetoric.

In Negation Vitanza will move beyond and yet hold on to Lyotard, who works out of the negative. In Negation, Vitanza will turn to Bataille and to a sublime subject to reconnect aesthetics and politics. Vitanza will also critique Wittgenstein, whose work, in Vitanza's estimation, remains tied to the polis, (the state, the law and even local nomoi) not the pagus (the site for all that is excluded from the polis): remember that Socrates chooses death over exile. And yet in thinking of the pagus, think also of Ovid, exile and writer of the Metamorphoses.

The pagus is the atopic location of what Vitanza will name "Third subject/object, Sophistic positions that are not positions" (Negation 52). The Pagus would be the non-locus of the hysteric and of the sublime subject.

[9]Lyotard, among others (Walter Benjamin, for example), has pointed out that the linking of aesthetics and politics is considered dangerous. In Nazi Germany, for example, the exclusion of the Jews was based on an effort to decide what was beautiful,

to decide what was ugly, and to exclude based on that aesthetic judgment. And yet Vitanza would follow Lyotard's other admonition that "just-linking" is a good thing, a "just" thing that can bear witness to differends ("a case of conflict, between (at least) two parties, that cannot be equitably resolved for lack of a rule of judgment applicable to both parties" [Lyotard Differend, xi]). Thus Vitanza would link (really re-link) aesthetics and politics, because, he argues, there is no logical reason to believe that a linking of aesthetics and politics must necessarily lead to behavior like that of the Nazis who tied their politics to what they perceived to be aesthetic. But Vitanza will not be arguing for an aesthetics tied to the beautiful, a category that Vitanza sees as negative (Kant's Third Critique of Judgment). Rather, Vitanza will tie his aesthetics to the excess of the sublime (both mathematical [sublime repetition] and dynamic [one glorious intense sublimity], which Vitanza sees as affirmative).

[10]Dissoi Logoi is the practice of contradictory or "two-sided argument" (Lanham A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms, 58). According to Lanham's definition, "a form of this analytical technique has recently been revived under 'Deconstruction'" (58). For further efforts to link the Sophistic practice of dissoi logoi with deconstruction, see Crowley "Of Gorgias and Grammatology" and Jarratt Rereading the Sophists.

For the purposes of his argument, Vitanza will extend dissoi-logoi to dissoi-paralogoi or "sub/versive paralogy" (Negation 35). Vitanza's sub/versive paralogy "desire[s] not just terms that reveal the strategic spots at which ambiguities necessarily arise, but terms that create, detonate, and exploit these ambiguities" ("Critical Sub/Versions" 55).

[11]I read Woolf's usage of the concept of androgyny not as a call for some utopian melding of the two sexes in one body, but as another name for what Vitanza, in rhetoric and composition theory and pedagogy, calls the "Excluded Third," tied as the systems of rhetoric and composition are to the West's founding metaphysics and to the binaries upon which that metaphysics builds.

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